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SUBJECT: KAZAKHSTAN: AMBASSADORS AGREE CIVIL SOCIETY IS WEAK, BUT
COUNTRY AHEAD OF ITS NEIGHBORS ON DEMOCRACY

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¶1. (U) Sensitive but unclassified. Not for public Internet.

¶2. (SBU) SUMMARY: At a recent lunch in honor of visiting Dutch Ambassador-at-Large for Human Rights Arjan Hamburger, several Astana-based Ambassadors exchanged views on Kazakhstan's democratic trajectory. All agreed that the recently adopted Madrid commitments legislation, while short of ideal, represents a platform for future reform. Kazakhstan's civil society is still weak, with only a handful of "real NGOs" that do not necessarily represent the wide range of the population's interests. Government-supported public associations and grass-roots social movements should not be ignored as valuable elements of democratic institution-building. The country's progress may be slow, but it is nevertheless far ahead of its neighbors, and moving in the right direction. END SUMMARY.

DUTCH ENVOYS HIGHLIGHTS IMPORTANCE OF HUMAN RIGHTS

¶3. (SBU) On February 3, the Ambassador attended a lunch in honor of visiting Dutch Ambassador-at-Large for Human Rights Arjan Hamburger hosted by Dutch Ambassador to Kazakhstan Klaas van der Temple. Other guests at the working lunch were UK Ambassador Paul Brummell, Czech Ambassador Bedrich Kopecky, OSCE Ambassador Alexandre Keltchewsky, Belgian Ambassador Christian Meerschman, and European Commission (EC) Deputy Head of Mission Hubert Petit.

¶4. (SBU) Ambassador Hamburger told the participants that the goal of his trip was to highlight the importance of human rights in Dutch foreign policy. Before coming to Astana, Hamburger spent several days in Almaty, where he met with civil society representatives, opposition leaders, members of the Unification Church, and the wife of detained "Alma-Ata Info" Editor-in-Chief Ramazan Yesergepov. He asked for the participants' assessments of Kazakhstan's progress towards democratization, particularly in light of the recently-adopted amendments to the laws on political parties,

elections, and the media -- i.e., the Madrid commitments legislation.

WEAK CIVIL SOCIETY...

15. (SBU) OSCE Ambassador Keltchewsky reflected positively on the Madrid laws, highlighting the participation of the NGO community in drafting the laws and noting in particular the "strong dialogue" that took place between the government and civil society on the media law. The political party and election laws did not go as far as civil society had hoped, he said, but they nevertheless represent a solid platform for future dialogue and reform. Keltchewsky lamented the fact that Kazakhstan's civil society remains weak. There are only a handful of "real NGOs" functioning in Kazakhstan, he said, and there is an open question of how representative they are of the population as a whole. In Keltchewsky's view, the international community must work with "civil society as a whole, not just the select Western-funded NGOs."

16. (SBU) The Ambassador stressed that the Madrid laws signify a step forward in Kazakhstan's democratization. He noted that the Kazakhstani government remains open to working with the OSCE and the international community to further improve their legislation. Speaking to Keltchewsky's point on civil society, the Ambassador shared his experience of attending a meeting of the Astana Editors-in-Chief Club, a government-approved public association that includes both opposition and pro-government journalists, where he witnessed a lively discussion about the media situation in Kazakhstan that encompassed a broad range of opinions (ref A). The Ambassador stressed that such public associations, as well as grass-roots social movements that have sprung up in reaction to the recent economic crisis, represent a valuable element of democratic

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institution-building, and he encouraged the participants to look beyond the standard NGOs for signs of nascent civil society.

... BUT FAR AHEAD OF ITS NEIGHBORS

17. (SBU) UK's Brummell agreed that Kazakhstan is open to input from the international community and quite "sensitive" to its image abroad. While the Madrid laws leave much to be desired, said Brummell, we must recognize that democratization will be a long process, one that will require patience. "There are limits to what we can do on the democratic agenda," he said. He stressed, however, that Kazakhstan is far ahead of its Central Asian neighbors -- "There are no political prisoners in Kazakhstan, and the opposition print media are flourishing." Czech Ambassador Kopecky argued that a new Western-educated generation is assuming positions of power in the government, and they are bound to bring a new outlook, "as long as they do not succumb to the temptation of corruption."

18. (SBU) Dutch Ambassador van der Temple argued that Kazakhstan is still behind on civil rights and freedoms, venturing that the title of Human Rights Watch's recent report, "The Atmosphere of Quiet Repression," is fitting in describing Kazakhstan's political environment. The Ambassador agreed that much work still remained, but stressed that Kazakhstan is a post-Soviet society, with little historical experience with democracy. The hope lies with the new leaders, he said, the "Bolashak" generation of officials who studied in the West and have returned to take positions in the government. Van der Temple conceded that Kazakhstan, while it looks somewhat bleak in comparison to Europe, is a "shining star" in Central Asia.

NGO-GOVERNMENT DIALOGUE

19. (SBU) The EC's Petit told the group that since December, the EC mission has been hosting weekly round-tables between local NGOs and various officials to help establish a dialogue between civil society and the government. Petit explained that the meetings are closed to the press and observers, so as to build an atmosphere of trust and cooperation among the participants. Petit cautiously appraised the venture as a success -- "A dialogue has begun." The others warmly welcomed the EC's initiative.

